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## ABSTRACT

This book is designed to provide a foundation in adult learning theory, a knowledge base that will increase understanding of what works and what does not work with the adult learner. It is written for practitioners who work with adults in nearly any setting. The book is both theoretical and practical. It provides a foundation in adult learning ideas and strategies based on research and personal experience, along with practical strategies for implementation. Chapter 1 discusses the purposes of educating adults and the underlying philosophies of adult education. Chapter 2 examines the various and diverse attributes of adult participants. How adults learn is explored in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 discusses theories of adult development. The last two chapters on facilitating adult learning and putting it all together provide important strategies and guidelines for effective practice. Within each chapter are found theoretical information, steps to review one's own experience, and implementation strategies that can be adapted to unique educational settings. Exercises are provided at the end of the chapters to enable readers to explore their own experiences. Appendixes include lists of 30 references, 5 needs assessment resources, and 5 learning styles resources; 9 principles of adult education; and a form to evaluate this book. (YLB)

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# THE KEYS TO ADULT EARNING

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ACTICAL STRATEGIES

ATRICIA A. LAWLER, ED.D.

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**THE KEYS TO ADULT LEARNING:  
THEORY AND PRACTICAL STRATEGIES**

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I had been working with adult students for seven years when I began my doctoral work in adult education. Reading the theory was like coming home to what I knew was really important for me and for my students. I grew excited about the underlying assumptions in adult learning because I knew they were real. I realized I wanted more than anything to teach adults how to teach adults. Michelle Woods-Houston understood my aspiration and encouraged me to write it all down. John Fielder also understood and patiently edited my enthusiastic ramblings.

P.A.L.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction.....  | 1  |
| Chapter 1 - What's It All About Anyway?.....             | 7  |
| Chapter 2 - Characteristics of Adult Learners.....       | 11 |
| Chapter 3 - How Adults Learn.....                        | 17 |
| Chapter 4 - Adult Development.....                       | 23 |
| Chapter 5 - The Keys to Facilitating Adult Learning..... | 33 |
| Chapter 6 - Putting It All Together.....                 | 47 |
| References.....  | 53 |
| Appendices   |    |
| A - Needs Assessment Resources.....                      | 57 |
| B - Learning Styles Resources.....                       | 59 |
| C - Principles of Adult Education.....                   | 61 |
| Evaluation Form.....                                     | 65 |

## INTRODUCTION

Most of us have a picture of how to teach children. After all, we were all children at one time and have many memories of how teachers, good and bad, conducted their classes. From this experience we have some idea of how to proceed, even if the details are fuzzy.

But when it comes to teaching adults, we are not as sure. Reflective educators will question whether the teaching methods and techniques appropriate for children make sense for adults. A classroom of children is in the same age and developmental cohort, but adults show much more diversity. Teaching adults may require a different teacher-student relationship. Unlike children, adults have a great deal of knowledge and life experience. How is learning facilitated when the students are the teacher's social and intellectual equals? And finally, adult learning seems so varied -- corporate classrooms, workshops, community center activities, university courses -- that the teacher of adults may wonder if there are any basic principles and concepts that can be used to facilitate adult learning with all of its different settings and audiences.

### Life-Long Learning

Adults aren't like children and teaching adults isn't like teaching children. Adult learning has its own characteristics, methods, and approaches, which an effective teacher of adults needs to know. A good place to start is with an understanding of the concept of life-long learning and the education of adults. No matter where we are, personally, in the educational system, at one time or another we have been adult students, and at one time or another we also have been responsible for teaching, training, or facilitating learning for another adult.

Life-long learning is a term coined during the '70s which describes the phenomenon of adult learning. Although adults have been "going to school" throughout history, it is only in the last 30 years or so that attention has been paid to the adult learner. Seeing that adults have the capacity to learn and change as they grow older has contributed to a positive view of the adult student. The old adage, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," fell by the wayside as research proved adults could and did learn throughout their lifetimes. As our society increased its pace of change, and technology created advance after advance, adult workers required more training and education to keep up. Education became imperative to meet the continually changing needs of our new information society. Life-long learning became a common expression to describe the needs of this society. It means that we have changed the way we view education, especially in the workplace.

These changes in society also brought increased leisure, increased health and longevity, increased illiteracy, and an increase in the disparity of social groups in this country. Adults use each of these as reasons for training and education. Think back throughout your own adult years: what educational experiences have you had? Going beyond the formal classroom in college or graduate school, what other educational events have you participated in as an adult student?

Each of us throughout adulthood has participated in a variety of learning activities. Your list may be varied, or more focused, with different themes at different times of your life. Starting a new career may mean participating in a series of training seminars. Starting a family may mean books, seminars, and support groups to enhance the ability to parent and juggle all of our responsibilities. Approaching retirement may mean new learning experiences for career retooling or enrichment and leisure activities. This is evident in the large number of older adults seen on college campuses today, attending regular classes and special programs, such as Elderhostel.

What is the thread that ties all of this diversity together? It is the fact that adults are engaged in learning throughout their lives -- life-long learning. For whatever reason, in whatever place, adults today are the majority of receivers of education. As practitioners, we have been given the challenge of designing and delivering a program or class for a group of adults. Whether in the workplace or private life, we will be dealing with the adult as a participant or student. The techniques and methodologies we learned in the past as students ourselves or as practitioners may not be suited to the adult population. We may have found them inadequate as instructors of adults. We may also have resented the approach a teacher or seminar leader has taken with us as students. There is a large body of information about adults as learners, about how to teach adults, and what works in the classroom with adults. This body of information is growing, some of it an excellent resource, some of it a confusing melange of techniques. Where do we start?

### **The Study of Adult Learning**

We start by acknowledging that a study of adult learning is important because adults are different from children, not only in age, but in experience, expertise, goals, and development. We start by acknowledging that there is a body of information based on research that can enhance our knowledge of what works in a classroom. And we start with our own experiences as adult learners.

This book provides practitioners with a reasonable and practical place to start. The book is designed to present a foundation in adult learning theory, a knowledge base that will increase understanding of what works and what does not



work with the adult learner. It is written for practitioners who work with adults in just about any setting. The basic principles of adult learning can be useful whether the participants are teachers taking an in-service day, senior citizens attending Elderhostel, university faculty dealing with an increased adult population in their courses, workshop planners in a community center, or trainers in a corporate environment.

The book itself is based on an important principle of adult learning -- that an adult has a wealth of experience, one which can be a rich resource in learning. As you read through this book, you will have many opportunities to review your own personal and educational experiences, from both the perspective of a student and a teacher or program designer. Take advantage of these opportunities to review what happened for you, what knowledge you have, how things worked for you. There are exercises to explore your own experiences as an adult learner, as well as resources for use in designing and implementing your own educational events for adults. For example, Exercise 1 provides the opportunity for you to explore the educational activities you have participated in during your adult years.

This book is both theoretical and practical. It provides a foundation based on research and personal experiences, along with practical strategies for implementation. You will see that there is a foundation in adult learning ideas and strategies which will enhance your work with adult participants. The important topics for understanding adult students are spelled out in each chapter. Chapter One, "What's It All About Anyway?", discusses the purposes in educating adults and the underlying philosophies of adult education. Chapter Two, "Characteristics of Adult Learners", examines the various and diverse attributes of adult participants. "How Adults Learn" is explored in Chapter Three; and theories of "Adult Development" are discussed in Chapter Four. The last two chapters, "The Keys to Facilitating Adult Learning" and "Putting It All Together", provide important strategies and guidelines for effective practice. Within each of these chapters you will find theoretical information, steps to review your own experience, and implementation strategies which can be adapted to your unique educational setting.

### **The Purpose of this Book**

Why is this book important? What purpose will it serve for you? First, as more and more adults seek out educational opportunities to enhance their job and career opportunities, to enrich their lives, to facilitate transitions and significant life events, and to change their economic destiny, practitioners have the responsibility to design and deliver programs suited to the adult learner. With competition crowding in on us, with illiteracy a national problem, and with billions of dollars allocated in business and industry for education, we have a need to know what

works effectively and efficiently. Second, as responsible and dedicated educators, we care about the quality of instruction. Understanding the uniqueness and diversity of the adult learner is crucial to providing a good learning event.

What are your reasons for reading this book? What do you want out of it? What are your own expectations and needs? How will you use the ideas and strategies concerning adult learning? Take some time to reflect on what you will be looking for. Throughout the book you are asked to think about your own experiences. As you will see, as both an adult learner and educator, this consideration of personal experience is important in adult learning -- an example of an effective strategy of working with the adult learner. Adult learners have important contributions to make, and these questions and exercises will make use of their experience. They are also examples of techniques which you may want to incorporate as you construct educational events for adult participants.

In the search for an effective approach to working with adults in the classroom, the place to start is with our own philosophy of education. In preparation for the next chapter, complete Exercise 1.

## THE KEYS TO ADULT LEARNING

## EXERCISE 1

## PERSONAL EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

Starting with ourselves as adult learners is a helpful way to understand the ideas and concepts of adult learning. We have all been adult learners at one time or another. Think back over your adult years and try to remember your experiences, both in the classroom and other educational activities. What are your most significant memories? In what types of classes or activities did you participate? What motivated you to sign up for a class or a course? Jot down some of these memories. These experiences will be called upon throughout the book.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

**EXERCISE 1 (continued)**

## This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT ANYWAY?**

Formal training in education usually includes a course in the philosophy of education. Such courses provide exposure to the philosophical and historical foundations that permeate educational practice. Here is where we as students read about the goals and values that underlie the roles of teacher, student, and organization, as well as establish a basis for methodology and curriculum. A course in philosophy can help us see why educators do the things they do.

#### **Philosophy and Adult Education**

Why take up philosophy in a study of adult learning? Well, to be effective practitioners, we need to start with what we believe in and how we view the world. It is important to get in touch with our basic value system, and what we think about education. Without this foundation, our practice is groundless, and our strategies directionless.

Many of us who are teaching and training adults may not have had a course in educational philosophy, nor the opportunity to read about why educators do the things they do. In our professional capacity we may need to be pragmatic and utilitarian to be efficient and get the job done. So, when we have a task at hand, like designing an in-service workshop for 10th grade teachers or a seminar in financial planning for senior citizens, we want to get right to it. Usually we are on a time-line, with deadlines just over the horizon. Taking time to reflect on our philosophy and how that impacts our practice may not be a luxury we have or demand.

However, such reflection can be important to teaching effectiveness. For example, Roger Hiemstra (1988) argued that it is very healthy for practitioners to reflect and question their personal philosophy and values in terms of professional actions. He proposed that, as adult educators, we should undertake the exercise of reviewing philosophy, values, and goals and creating our own personal philosophical framework for professional practice. Hiemstra cited four reasons for this exercise:

- A philosophy promotes an understanding of human relationships.
- A philosophy sensitizes one to the various needs associated with positive human interactions.
- A philosophy provides a framework for distinguishing, separating, and understanding personal values.

- A philosophy promotes flexibility and consistency in working with adult learners.

Merriam (1982) agreed with Hiemstra that philosophy can inform practice and "directly affects curriculum and instruction" (p.91). She cautioned, "One's view of the adult learner, the learning process, and the goals of adult education guides the selection of content and the planning of instruction" (p.91). Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) pointed out, "Whether or not it is articulated, a philosophical orientation underlies most individual and institutional practices in adult education" (p.37).

### **The Major Philosophical Conceptions of Adult Education**

This need for a grounding in philosophy is vital for effective practice because it helps us understand what drives us in our work. There are a number of major philosophical directions in adult education. These directions are based on philosophical systems which are the foundations for all education, but for our purposes we will link them only to adults and adult education. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) described five directions:

- **Cultivation of the Intellect** -- This direction is best described as traditional education. The curriculum emphasizes the liberal arts and the development of intellectual powers of the mind. Content is important. The teacher is the authority and there is little interaction between teacher and student. Education is seen as a neutral activity divorced from social action. The Great Books Program illustrates the emphasis on liberal education with its study of the classics.
- **Personal Development** -- This direction is drawn from the humanist and existential movements of the '50s and '60s. Education is seen as promoting individual growth and development. Content is whatever will promote that growth. The student is the focus of the learning process and group interaction is the favored instructional mode. This direction is evident in human development or human potential seminars as found in corporate training programs, life change programs, and in encounter-type groups and cooperative activities in many diverse educational settings.
- **Personal and Social Improvement** -- This progressive view of education is based on the writings of John Dewey and has had a strong influence on American educational philosophy. Content is drawn from the student's life experiences and problem solving is the instructional mode of choice. Teachers and students are partners in the task of learning. The aim of education is to develop the student so that he/she may become a better

member of society. Two examples of this direction are Americanization education and the community education movement. In the past, educators have sought to "Americanize" new immigrants focusing on "citizenship training." Today with our new wave of immigrants, the focus is on literacy and job skills, such as the ESL programs.

- **Radical Social Change** -- This direction is unique to adult education; education is seen as value laden and never neutral. The content comes from the learner's consciousness, where the learner is seen as oppressed and disadvantaged. The teacher also is a learner in this educational process and never one who simply "deposits" information in the minds of the students. Methodology is seen as a dialogical encounter that leads to reflective thought and action. The aim of education is to bring about new social order and change. Education is seen as closely connected with social, political, and economic understanding of cultures, and with the development of methods to bring people to an awareness of responsible social action. Although this direction is not pervasive in American adult education, its impact is felt mainly in the adult literacy programs, where learning to read is seen as an avenue to change.
- **Organizational Effectiveness** -- A large segment of American adult education, especially in business and industry, is concerned with organizational effectiveness, which in turn promotes profitability. As both the public and private sectors strive to become more efficient deliverers of goods and services, there is an expansion of human resource development and training in the workplace. Within this framework, educational programs are designed to achieve the organization's goals and enhance its effectiveness. The goal of most training is behavior change, and the theories of behaviorism have greatly influenced this direction.

These directions provide different conceptualizations for describing the purposes and goals of education for adult students. They also can be the framework for designing programs based on a particular view of the adult learner and the purpose of education.

### Developing Your Philosophy of Education

Most of us have been exposed to these philosophical directions, and our own philosophy may reflect a hodgepodge of philosophical ideas and a conglomeration of values. What is important is identifying and understanding what drives both our own educational perspective and that of the organization within which we work. A firm understanding of what is important to us and a clear view of



adult students and their education can provide a grounded purpose and guidelines to facilitate our work.

How would you define your philosophy of education? When working with adult students, whether it's in a staff development seminar or a graduate course, what purpose underlies your program design and teaching? Why continue to educate people during their adult lives? What is important for a student in an educational environment? What are our obligations as facilitators of learning? What theories and philosophical systems have impressed you? Who has influenced your thinking on the purpose and aims of education? Take some time to reflect on your own philosophy and what drives your own individual practice.

Thinking about the philosophical perspectives presented in this chapter, which one best describes your own thoughts? Are you eclectic in your approach to education, or do you adhere to one ideology? Which one of the philosophical directions best fits you, best fits your organization? This reflective process provides the opportunity to be specific about your purpose for education, your role as a teacher, and your goals for teaching.

### **Implications for Practice**

What implications does this reflective process have for practice? What is the practical side of reviewing philosophy and values? First, many adult educators see this reflection as an important process for gaining an understanding about themselves and their work. Second, in our busy lives we can make decisions more efficiently and effectively if we are clear on what drives our practice. Third, we can see whether or not our philosophy is in line with good principles of adult education. As we go through this book, we will be creating criteria for good practice based on research and experience. Understanding how these criteria fit with philosophy is important in selecting the best methodology for working with specific adult audiences.

Let's turn now to that audience. Who are the adult learners? What makes them different? And what do they want from education?



## CHAPTER TWO CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNERS

At first it may seem easy to distinguish an adult student from a younger learner -- just look at the difference in years. But the difference goes beyond age and years. This chapter examines adult learners and what makes them different from younger students. It outlines important principles based on these differences which can guide program development and instruction.

Think for a moment about adulthood. What makes an adult different from a child? We know that adults are older than children, that they have responsibilities in their work, families, and community, which children do not have, and that they are in charge of their lives. Adults are defined by legal descriptions, i.e., voting age, drinking age, by the roles they take on, by the life tasks they have. Perhaps, more important for our purposes, adults are capable of complex conscious processes. In Chapter Four we will take a look at the notion of growth, change, and development in adulthood. For now, we will include in the definition of an adult that they have the capacity to grow and develop beyond the physical dimensions associated with growth in childhood. In what ways are you different from when you were a child or a teenager? Exercise 2 asks you to list all the ways you are now different as an adult. Think about what these differences mean for program development and teaching.

These differences are important in the design and development of educational events for adults. So many classes, seminars, workshops, and tutorials are based on traditional educational methodology. Memorization, lecture large classes, and minimal involvement seem to be the "tried and true" ways to educate. Critics have been quick to point out over the years that this methodology may be ineffective. As students, we may have found these methods boring, intimidating, and hard. Now, research in the field of adult education is showing that the old methods are inappropriate for adults, and perhaps for young students as well!

### Characteristics of Adult Learners

Adults participate in a great variety of educational activities, from formalized college classes to self-initiated learning events. What are some of the common characteristics of adult learners? As an adult learner, how would you characterize yourself? During the past few years have you participated in a class or workshop that was uniquely adult education? As the characteristics of adults are discussed, consider your own experience. Chapter Five will show how to incorporate effective strategies into instructional methods and program design based on these characteristics:

- Adults have many roles and responsibilities in their lives, education being only one, and usually not the major task at the time of its undertaking. In contrast, children and youth have education as their major responsibility.
- Adults are usually motivated by a pragmatic desire to immediately use or apply their knowledge or skill. As children, we learn information and skills which build over the years, preparing us for our future adult roles.
- Adults are usually prompted by a transitional event in their lives to seek education. Events such as divorce, job change death, or moving, can be cited as reasons for learning. Children and youth have a formalized education plan that proceeds without much influence from transitions in their lives.
- Most adults attend an educational event voluntarily. Children and youth usually have compulsory education.

Malcolm Knowles (1980) specifically cited four assumptions about adult learners that place them apart from children and youth. His famous ideas on "andragogy," the assumption that adults learn differently from how children learn, are still influential today in the field of adult education. He characterized adult learners as:

- having a self-concept which moves from being one of a dependent personality toward being a self-directed human being;
- accumulating a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning;
- orienting their readiness to learn to developmental tasks of their social roles;
- changing their perspective from one which postpones the application of knowledge to one which sees the immediacy of knowledge application (pp.44-45).

### Implications for Practice

What do these characteristics mean for the task of working with adult students? They mean that we must understand the unique character of adults. Adults are a diverse group of students. They come to an educational event for a variety of reasons. They are interested in connecting their educational experiences

with their life tasks. They are, for the most part, looking to education to fill a gap in their lives and meet immediate needs.

Take a look at the reasons you, an adult, have turned to education. Think back over the past few years and the educational activities, both formal and informal, in which you took part. Did you participate in staff development workshops, read a book on becoming a better personal financial manager, work through a word processing tutorial on the computer, attend a graduate course at the university, or join a book discussion group at church? What were your reasons for signing up and attending, for taking on these various educational tasks? In reviewing examples from your own experience, can you see the diversity of adult education and the diversity of reasons for participating?

### **Needs Assessment**

In beginning to develop programs and classes for adults, you will need to pay close attention to your students' needs. What are the reasons adults participate? As you think about your own reasons for engaging in an educational activity, you may see that they are goal oriented, fulfilling an immediate career or personal need. Understanding the reasons adults participate and assessing their needs is an important first step in successful program development. Whether directed to instruct a prepackaged seminar or create an entire staff development project, whether the contact with participants is two hours or two years, being in touch with what an adult student wants and needs is crucial.

Needs assessment in itself can be an overwhelming topic and chore. Understanding the unique characteristics of adult learners can help in finding some important starting points for curriculum design and program methodology. These characteristics can be the framework for needs, especially if limited time and resources for needs assessment are available.

In working with adults, we need to remember that they: are experienced in directing their own lives, have a wealth of experiences and expertise, and are interested in being treated with the respect associated with adulthood. An important point to consider in assessing needs is the involvement of program participants in the process. What do we need to think about in conducting a needs assessment for adult programs?

There are volumes of information on conducting needs assessment. Appendix A includes several resources to use in the development of a needs assessment project for adult participants. For now, let us summarize some basic important points.

Needs assessment is described as the gap between "what is" and "what could be." The adult may well know what this gap is and how it needs to be bridged. Administrators, managers, and teachers also can determine what is necessary to bridge the gap. For adult education, it is important to take the participants into consideration when determining their needs. This can be done in a variety of ways.

If there is time, money, and staff, a formal needs assessment can be conducted through interviews, surveys, focus groups, prior evaluations, performance appraisals and evaluations, or a technique known as discrepancy analysis. Asking the right audience and asking the right questions are crucial in producing valid and useable data in a needs assessment.

### **Informal Means of Needs Assessment**

Many times, a formal needs assessment cannot be conducted. In such cases, we can rely on existing information concerning the adult learner and utilize some "quick" techniques in the classroom. As we have mentioned, adults bring their own expectations to the educational activity. They have their own needs and reasons for attending. It is important to listen to these participants to find out what they want out of the activity. Adult learners usually want to relate their learning to their immediate lives. They take a class, seminar, or training program or read this book, because there is an immediate need to be satisfied in their lives. To conduct a "quick" needs assessment, provide an opportunity at the beginning of the activity for participants to share their expectations with each other and with you. Throughout the activity, refer to these expectations to reinforce the immediacy of what is being learned. At the conclusion of the activity, give the participants an opportunity to compare their expectations and your objectives with what they experienced and gained during the program.

There are two essentials to consider as you begin to plan or conduct an adult education activity. First, try to get as much information about the participants as you can. Having this information while preparing the activity can help you adapt it to their needs, styles, and expectations. Second, in organizing this information, be sure to consider who they are, their reasons for attending, possible expectations and goals, background in the program content, experience in education, and the contingent benefits of participation. At this point your focus is on the participants more than on content and process. Adult education is learner-centered, meaning that it starts with the participants, with where they are, and takes into consideration what will be meaningful for them.

This chapter has discussed several characteristics of adult learners. It is important to know about these characteristics in planning and implementing adult

education activities. It is also important to find out from prospective participants just why are they attending or undertaking the learning activity.

Another important characteristic which must be considered is how an adult learns differently from how a child learns. Chapter Three takes a close look at the aspects of adult learning. Please complete Exercise 2 in preparation for proceeding.

## THE KEYS TO ADULT LEARNING

### EXERCISE 2

#### ADULT LEARNERS VS. YOUNGER LEARNERS

List any ways you are different now as an adult from the way you were as a child and a teenager:

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What implications do these differences have for educational programs and instructional methods?

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## **CHAPTER 3**

### **HOW ADULTS LEARN**

As seen in the previous chapter, adults are different from younger learners in many ways. They are within themselves diverse. This is important to remember, for as we grow older and gain experiences, we grow more different from others in our age cohort. Adults grow and change all during adulthood, but not in the "lock step" manner we associate with childhood development. Our growth is no longer physical in the sense of a child growing up. Our experiences become diverse and send us on various developmental paths which affect what we undertake as adults and how we view education. Bee (1987), writing about adult development as a journey, proposes six elements -- gender, race, intelligence, personality, social class, education -- that effect the course of an adult's life and "are powerful forces creating differences in developmental patterns" (p.55). These differences have an impact on how each of us learns. This diversity is an important characteristic of the adult learner.

Through whatever window adults are viewed as learners, it must be remembered that they are different and they learn differently. This does not have to be a daunting dilemma for the program developer or teacher. This diversity can enliven an educational activity and contribute to the course objectives, especially if it is taken into consideration in the formulation of the activity.

### **Styles of Adult Learning**

There are many ways people can learn. Each person has their own "style" which produces results for them. Think about the way you learn. What makes it happen for you? How would you describe your own learning style? Do you like to learn in a group setting, or sitting alone poring over a book or a manual? Is seeing the way something works important to you? Is reading about a topic enough for you, or do you need to see and hear a demonstration on it? Do you break your information down into many separate entities, or do you need to see the big picture first? How do you personally learn best?

Each of us is an individual, with a particular personality and learning style. Over the years we have found successful ways to facilitate our own learning. We become quickly aware when an educational event is presenting information in a way that is hard for us. A recent assignment to teach a course in an area of much experience and some theoretical background led the author to seek the advice of her dean. They talked about all the options for learning new information. The author's preference is to take a course to hear the information, work with examples from real life, and engage in group interaction. It seems that the best way to learn, for her, is through interaction with others and giving it a go with the topic at hand.

However, the dean suggested many books, library research, and regular meetings to discuss the information. He enjoyed the opportunity to learn in a quiet environment, where he could read all the material and assimilate it at his own pace. These two preferences represent very different learning styles, both very efficient. This example illustrates how, as adults, we come to know what works best for us. We have a way that suits our personalities and learning abilities. As educators of adults, we must be cognizant of the fact that students each have their own style and work toward making opportunities within educational events that allow for this diversity.

Adults may not be conscious of their individual style. They may know that a method works or doesn't work for them, but they may not know why. As we begin to work with adults, it is important to get to know the participants and help them come to know their learning styles. In getting to know them we can assess their learning styles, determine what is comfortable for them, and incorporate methodology which will take advantage of their style. The critical incident technique described in Chapter Five is a useful way of getting to know what works for participants.

Perhaps this diversity seems overwhelming. Does this mean that we need to go around asking everyone, "Do you like groups or reading a book to learn a new task?" No. Does this mean we need to adapt each educational event to the students? Yes. Chapter Five will also provide examples of how to make this all work for you by using the Keys to Facilitating Adult Learning.

### **Formal Tests for Learning Styles**

One useful way to conceptualize the idea of different learning styles comes from the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator. Using Jung's psychological types, Drs. Myers and Briggs developed an instrument which characterizes a person's personality type in terms of the way that they learn, conceptualize information, make decisions, and perceive the world. The Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator produces 16 types of learners, depending on how a person scores on the continua for four dimensions: introversion-extroversion, sensing-intuition, thinking-feeling, and judging-perceiving.

- **Introversion-Extroversion** -- a preference for either dealing with the inner world of ideas or the outer world of people and things
- **Sensing-Intuition** -- a preference for taking in information through the five senses or for relying on "gut feelings" and the possibilities of the situation



- **Thinking-Feeling** -- a preference for making decisions impersonally based on analysis and principle, or personally based on liking and disliking, on values and the impact of the decision on people
- **Judging-Perceiving** -- a preference for coming to final conclusions or continually taking in information.

This popular instrument has been widely used in career development, counseling, staff development, and education. Its results can make us aware of our own styles, how we operate, and how we learn. This can be affirming in that we recognize our own uniqueness, our capacity to learn, and that there is no one "right" way to learn.

It may not be possible to administer the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator to each and every student. However, awareness of this tool and the concepts behind it in understanding adult learning can be very important in designing and delivering educational activities. For further background information and resources on the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator, see Appendix B.

Another useful way to think about participants' learning styles has been developed by David Kolb (1985). Through research with his Learning Style Inventory (LSI), Kolb demonstrated that many different individual patterns of response identified four prevalent types of learning styles. He described each of these styles and their greatest strength:

- **Convergers** -- practical application of ideas
- **Divergers** -- imaginative ability
- **Assimilators** -- ability to create theoretical models
- **Accommodators** -- active implementation of plans and involvement in new experiences.

Resource information on Kolb's Learning Style Inventory also is listed in Appendix B.

Kolb urges that these descriptors not be used as stereotypes, but as tools to understand the diversity and complexity of cognitive processes and how they are manifested in participants' learning behavior. Caution also is urged in using the Myers-Briggs labels. Each of us has a working definition for the various descriptors; these instruments carefully define their terms, which may go beyond any single working definition.

Our preferences for learning are on a continuum. We have a little of each style or preference within us and utilize the associated abilities as the learning situation warrants. What is important to remember here is that each individual has a dominant or preferred style, one which we use most often, one which is easiest for us. As educators, we are interested in recognizing participants' preferred styles to facilitate their learning process.

### **Learning and the Aging Process**

There are other ways in which adults learn that need to be considered. After reviewing the research on adult learning, Cross (1980) reported that adults continue learning throughout their years, although the time required for learning new things increases with age. This is especially true in memorizing information. Research on crystallized and fluid intelligence reveals that in youth we were more efficient at memorizing information and acquiring new knowledge. This capacity, fluid intelligence, is at its best during youth. As we grow older, we become more proficient at evaluating and applying information. Our crystallized intelligence, which relies on experience and accumulated knowledge, along with interactions with the environment, increases with age. This decrease/increase phenomenon equalizes intelligence over the years. In working with adult students, we come to understand that they have great capacities for synthesizing information, relating new information to an accumulated knowledge base, and putting it to use. If we make information meaningful to adults, relate it to their experiences, and give them time to assimilate it, adults will be successful learners.

There are also physical changes of aging that occur throughout adulthood. As educators, which of these need to be considered in working with an adult population? First, as we grow older, our eyesight changes. There may also be some hearing loss, slower reaction time, and a decrease in energy levels. Considering the fact that adults are a diverse group, these physical changes occur at different rates and in different ways for adult students. These are easy to compensate for in the classroom and need not interfere greatly in an adult's ability to learn (Cross, 1980). For example, paying attention to the lighting in a classroom, making sure the audio equipment is at an acceptable level, providing ample time for knowledge acquisition and task mastery, equipping the classroom with suitable and comfortable furniture, taking regular breaks, and using a variety of instructional methods will help adults learn.

Making an adult comfortable by adjusting for physical changes can facilitate the learning process. The important point is to be sensitive in the design and also use common sense. In considering your own experience, both as an adult student and as an adult educator, you will recognize effective strategies to be utilized in your own work. Adult learning experiences that have not worked well for you can

uncover helpful indicators of effectiveness and provide useful hints about what does work well with adults.

Another dimension of adult learning is adult development. Chapter Four describes some relevant theories in adult development and how they can facilitate adult education and work with adult learners.

## CHAPTER FOUR ADULT DEVELOPMENT

Another useful way to view adult learning is through the window of adult development. The idea that adults grow and develop throughout their lifetime is not a new idea. In 500 B.C., Confucius perceived adults as having different concerns in each decade of their lives, and Shakespeare wrote about the "seven ages" of life in *As You Like It*. However, it was not until the 1970s that these notions of adult development phases became popularized by Gail Sheehy's book, *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*. Sheehy's interviews with men and women throughout America illustrated how adults experience sequences of growth marked by predictable turning points associated with certain ages. The increased life span of adults, the formalized study of human development, and the increase in research about adult learning have led to the development of a significant body of knowledge centering on how adults change and grow throughout their lives. Reviewing this information can be helpful in the design and development of adult programs and teaching methodology.

Let's start with our own development. It is helpful to look at our own lives, with their stages, transitions, and critical events to see how the various ideas and theories of adult development fit real lives. At the end of this chapter there is an exercise which asks you to think back over your life and the events which shaped it. This Life Line Exercise is an effective tool in analyzing adult life for developmental changes and for the ways in which adults use education as a coping strategy for life transitions. You may want to complete this Life Line Exercise before reading on in order to have a sense of your developmental and educational patterns. As with any of these exercises, this one may be helpful to use with your students.

Throughout our lives we are met with challenges and events that affect how we proceed through our lives. At these turning points and transitional periods, many adults turn to education to facilitate the change required in careers, personal roles, or relationships. In what ways have you responded to change with education? How has your life progressed as a result of going to school? Adults often use education to make transitions and to respond to crises and unanticipated events in their lives (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Boucouvalas, 1989). Being aware of the connection between adult developmental paths and the reasons for participation in an educational event helps in assessing participant needs and organizing learning effectively.

With the proliferation of studies and research in adult development during the past 30 years, there is now a substantial body of knowledge and a variety of perspectives to consider. For our purposes, two ways of looking at adult development are most useful. One is from the perspective of the life cycles we go

through and the various roles which each phase of life may require. The second perspective examines how adults' conscious processes change as they advance through moral, intellectual, and cognitive stages of development. Both perspectives have implications for work with the adult learner.

### Life Cycles

Theorists like Levinson, Lowenthal, Gould, and Sheehy have used the idea of life cycles to understand the common tasks people confront facing the problems and day-to-day situations associated with growing older. They view development as a series of psychosocial phases, cycles, or seasons which we pass through during the adult years. Each cycle has a distinct character which is related to age, social expectations, and roles. There are predictable turning points or transitions between the cycles. These culturally determined cycles can be very different for men and women, or for different racial and ethnic groups of people. Their commonality lies in the patterns of distinct phases associated with who we are and the roles we play in each phase. For example, Sheehy (1976, 1981) described 10 phases of adult life beginning with the period 18 to 22 years of age. During this period, adults have tasks such as separation from parents and the development of autonomy and identity. Later, as we enter the "deadline decade," 35 to 45 years, we see ourselves at a crossroads and confront the loss of youth and changing physical powers. Many adults, especially mothers, may begin a new career at this time. It is also, according to Sheehy, a time of both danger and opportunity, as we begin the second half of our life. Entering our later years, we may begin sorting out what is truly important about our life, our relationships, our work, and our community. Adjustment to retirement, loss of spouse or friends, and physical changes pose unique challenges. Each phase brings its own tasks and roles each person must address.

Theorists like Sheehy also see adult life as moving from one period or phase to another in a linear progression. In each period we cope with a developmental issue particular to that period, such as career preparation in the early twenties, and undertake the tasks related to the psychosocial roles of that age, such as the "empty nest" in the forties or fifties with its redefinition of parenting. In moving from stage to stage, we pass through a transitional period. Coping with these transitions provides an opportunity for learning; transitions present "teachable" moments.

Taking into consideration life events of adults as predictors of their developmental stage and the tasks to be accomplished in each stage, some developmental theorists have proposed a map of human life. Lowenthal et al. (1975), as a result of major research work, *Four Stages of Life*, suggests providing a life course perspective orientation, so people will know what to expect over their



life span. They have found that adults not only proceed through their adult life in stages, but also that transitions mark the beginning and end of the stages. Aside from age transitions, they learned that idiosyncratic transitions, such as sojourns in another culture, geographic moves, or serious illnesses or impairment, may also have profound meaning for growth and adaptation.

In his book, **Seasons of a Man's Life**, Levinson (1978) presents qualitative research findings on the lives of 40 men between the ages of 35 and 45. Levinson puts forth a theory of development that is age-linked, with stages of equilibrium alternating with transitional periods of disequilibrium. Levinson describes three transitional periods in the lives of adult males. Early adult transition occurs during the twenties, when we seek to establish a career and family, along with developing a sense of competence. Mid-life transition during the early forties symbolizes the bridge from early adulthood to middle adulthood. During this time we are apt to ask what we have done with our lives, and how we wish to live out the remaining years. Late adult transition represents the time of preparation for retirement and the physical declines of old age. Each of these times has developmental tasks to be completed and "life structures" to which we adapt. Levinson states that "over the years, the life structure evolves through a standard sequence of periods...a basic source of order in the life cycle" (p.41). Although Levinson uses a very limited sample, his work does provide an important framework, but he cautions against applying the findings to individuals:

This sequence of eras and periods exists in all societies throughout the human species, at the present stage in human evolution. The eras and periods are grounded in the nature of man [sic] as a biological, psychological and social organism, and in the nature of society as a complex enterprise extending over many generations. They represent the life cycle of the species. Individuals go through the periods in infinitely varied ways, but the periods themselves are universal (p.322).

A careful analysis of these developmental theories is necessary. At the time of these studies, most theorists believed that women's developmental patterns were similar to men's or that they were not worth studying. In the past few years, research on women's development by Schlossberg (1986), Gilligan (1982), Sanguilaiano (1978), McGuigan (1980), and DeLago (1986) have made a substantial impact on adult development theory. "Developmental theory has established men's experience and competence as a baseline against which both men's and women's development is then judged, often to the detriment or misreading of women" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p.7). If women were included in the past, they were measured against the male model. Generalizations from the study of male development should be cautiously applied to women and to other ethnic, cultural, and economic groups.

Women's lives have been found to have a pattern and sequence different from men's lives. Women respond to transitions and crises in a variety of different ways. Their parenting role may produce a different life sequence for their careers. Also, women now in their twenties are experiencing a different life pattern than women their age did 20 or 30 years ago -- prior to the women's movement. Society's mores, restrictions, and inequities have all had an impact on women's life patterns and perceptions of women's development. This relatively new field will have much to add to the already existing body of knowledge. In addition to noting differences between men and women, researchers have also begun to look at developmental patterns of various ethnic groups, as well as different economic groups (Sheldon, 1981).

Take a look at your life line depicted in Exercise 3. Can you see a sequential pattern of development? Where were your transitional periods and what events marked them? What were the unique characteristics and behaviors of each period? How does your own life relate to the research described above? How does your life compare with others? What are the similarities? What are the differences? The experiences throughout your life can be helpful illustrations of adult life patterns. Comparing your life line with Exercise 1, what influence has education had on your life events? In what way did you respond to a life event or transition with an educational activity?

Think about your future adult education participants, how are their lives structured? In what phase or cycle of development are they? What connection does their age and developmental role have to the educational activity for which you are responsible? Those of us who work in adult education can incorporate research on adult development into our thinking and planning by answering these questions. The answers present clues as to readiness to learn, priorities for educational topics, and needs for support.

### Life Stages

The second perspective on adult development revolves around the idea that, as we progress through our adult years, we grow in our conscious powers in an ordered sequence toward increasingly complex capacities. These conscious powers include how we think about the world we live in, make judgements and decisions, and conceive ourselves and our relationships with others. Cross (1980) reported that "in almost all developmental-stage research, the movement is from simple stereotyped thinking and perceptions, through an awareness of multiple possibilities and differentiated views of oneself and society, to conceptual complexity, toleration of ambiguity, objectivity, and broadened vision" (p.177). Theorists like Loevinger, Perry, Kohlberg, and Gilligan see the adult years not in a linear progression with life tasks determined by role and age, but as a hierarchal

series of challenges toward intellectual and moral growth and maturity. These changes occur internally and are not necessarily related to age or social task. Persons can be "stuck" in a simplistic stance of engaging with the world throughout their entire lives. From this perspective, adult development consists of opportunities to change our view of ourselves and our world. It means getting outside of one's own world and seeing this world through the eyes of others (Daloz, 1986).

Adults who are functioning in competent and successful ways in their professional and personal lives may come into classrooms with trepidation and anxiety. Some see the teacher as an authority figure and expert. They may hesitate to accept divergent views, or to have confidence in their own thinking and questioning. However, if adult development is a process in which adults move from simplistic thinking to a more confident, complex process, then the teacher's role is encouraging questioning, risk taking, and tolerance of ambiguity. This is not done by confrontation, but through a process of reflecting on life experiences, assumptions, and values. With each educational task, we can ask participants what they learned, how the process of learning affected them, and how the new learning changed their perspectives and assumptions.

Because adults have the capacity to move to more complex conscious processes, they are capable of this critical reflection (Brookfield, 1986; Mezirow, 1981, 1990). Adults are capable of critically reflecting on their world, themselves, and their relationships. In this process the adult identifies and challenges assumptions and then explores and imagines alternatives (Brookfield, 1987). Identifying and exploring assumptions enables what Mezirow (1978) calls perspective transformation. Similar to the idea of consciousness raising, perspective transformation is the process whereby we see and assess our relationship with the world and thereby transform our perspectives by that critical assessment. Mezirow (1985) points out:

As adults, we can learn to examine critically and understand the reasons for the psychocultural assumptions which impede our development. We can also learn how to take action to change social practices and institutions which implement and legitimate the distorting ideologies which enthrall us (pp.147-148).

These are unique processes of adulthood and ones which we, as educators, can foster and encourage. As a result of research and study in the area of adult development, educators and trainers have come to the realization that adults do learn throughout their life span.



## **Applications to Program Development**

In program development, the concepts of life cycles, developmental stages, transitions, and the possibility of growth and change are practical starting points for program content. What developmental task can be the subject matter for an adult education activity? Career change seminars, parenting classes, re-adjusting to single life workshops, and outplacement training are all examples of responding to adult life transitions. Even within a pre-packaged staff development seminar or college credit course, a teacher can be aware of the life factors affecting the performance and perspective of his/her students, such as a person's multiple roles or rethinking career goals.

## **Support Services**

These concepts also "can help planners understand the need for and type of support services necessary to the program's success" (Merriam, 1984, p.26). Beyond the classroom, we need to understand what is necessary to help students succeed. There are many support services available for youth; schools and colleges have counseling and advising for students. Even though adult students are seen as mature and competent, as they enter an educational activity, they may experience anxiety and lack confidence. Expanding counseling and advising services to adults can be an intervention which will promote confidence and success. Schlossberg, et al (1989) reported that, with support services and feedback from teachers and advisors, adults feel empowered, that they "gain clearer and more realistic perceptions of themselves and their environments" (p.206).

## **Applications to Instruction**

With regard to instruction, "development thus affects instruction from the perspective of what is known about changes in learning ability, an adult's life-experiential base, and the movement toward an independent self-concept and self-directedness in adulthood" (Merriam, 1984, p.28-29). Daloz (1986) described this developmental process as one in which we successively ask broader and deeper questions of the relationship between ourselves and the world. He believes that education should promote this development, and as teachers "we must be concerned not simply with how much knowledge our students have acquired but also with how they are making meaning of that knowledge and how it is affecting their capacity to go on learning, framing the world in ever more inclusive and comprehensive ways" (p.237).

# THE KEYS TO ADULT LEARNING

### EXERCISE 3

## LIFE LINE

This exercise is designed to stimulate you to think about your life and record the significant events that have shaped it, starting with childhood and continuing up to the present time. List significant events in the order in which they occurred. After listing these events you may want to take a larger piece of paper and magic markers to pictorially create your life line, illustrating the significant events which have led you to your present point in life.

### Significant Events in Your Life Line

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper appears to be a standard notebook page or a sheet of stationery. The edges of the paper are slightly irregular, suggesting it might be a scan of a physical document. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.

## Conclusion

Adult learning is clearly affected by the learner's stage of development. Determining where adult students are in their life cycles and conscious processes allows adjustment of the curriculum, instructional methods, and support services to respond to their concerns. How a person learns, what is important to be learned, and when learning takes place are all affected by where a person is in the life span. This contextual approach can enhance the quality of educational interventions. Whether the focus is on students' roles and transitions in their life cycles, their developmental growth, or both, this information can help us understand the diversity of students and their reasons for participating.

Up to now the focus has been on the characteristics of adult students and how they learn. Chapter Five presents keys to working with adult students based on the guiding principles of adult education.

## THE KEYS TO ADULT LEARNING

### EXERCISE 3 (continued)

#### LIFE LINE

##### Life Line Questions

What significant events prompted the most profound change in your life?

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What role has education played in your life events?

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Where was the locus of control in your major life decisions -- internal or external?

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## THE KEYS TO ADULT LEARNING

### EXERCISE 3 (continued)

#### LIFE LINE

How do these life line events fit in with the educational activities in Exercise 1?

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## **CHAPTER FIVE FACILITATING ADULT LEARNING**

Teaching and training adults can be an exciting and challenging effort. Many who are working with adults in classrooms, workshops, and training programs are eager to make the educational experience "work" for adult participants. The preceding chapters have discussed adult learners and their unique characteristics, focusing on their learning and developmental patterns. We have reflected on our own experiences as adult learners. Now, how do we put new understandings to work in our programs and classrooms? How can we make educational activities more effective for the adult participant? This chapter outlines six "Keys to Facilitating Adult Learning." It provides practical guidelines for working with adults that incorporate the ideas and theories established earlier in the book.

### **Using Critical Incident Responses**

The author's study of what works and doesn't work in adult classrooms and programs has shown that it is crucial to understand the ingredients which the participants themselves find effective or ineffective. So, start by taking a look at your own experience as an adult learner. Think back over the past few years and the various educational activities in which you have participated. Which of these learning situations was the best and why was it the best? Which was the worst? Complete Exercise 4 at the end of this chapter. Take a minute to reflect on your best educational experience as an adult and your worst educational experience. What made each so memorable? What comes to mind for you? This exercise uses the critical incident technique. It is an effective tool in obtaining specific information from respondents regarding a particular event or situation. Experience with adult students suggests that they almost always report the same ideas.

In describing their best learning experience, they cite participating in a group experience, a positive atmosphere in the classroom, active participation, and an opportunity to relate the content to their immediate needs, such as a job or family situation. What was your best and why? Did you mention any of these? Most responses center around the program design and delivery, and reflect many of the characteristics of adult learners and what is important for them in an educational activity.

For the worst, we all have a classroom "horror story" to tell. When asked what was their worst educational experience, participants are usually quick to mention an instructor -- someone who did not invite questions, embarrassed them in the classroom, or was just plain boring. The responses also center around the lack of participation. And we all have had the experience in a classroom when we felt like children again because of the instructor's attitude toward us.

A critical incident exercise can provide helpful clues in working with the adult learner and confirm much that has been discussed in this book. You can use this in the beginning of a class to gain an understanding of the students, to provide information about their learning styles, and to engage them in the class process. Discussion of what makes learning work for them helps you to focus on their diversity and helps them understand their own styles. This awareness of the learning process is important for the adult participant. If we understand what has blocked us in our education, those worst experiences, we can begin to understand our anxiety in approaching an educational activity.

### **Six Keys to Facilitating Adult Learning**

All the foregoing discussion leads to practical advice for adult educators - the "Keys to Adult Learning."

#### **KEY 1 -- UNDERSTAND AND REDUCE ANXIETY**

Have you ever walked into a seminar or class and suddenly realized you were remembering those "horror stories" from a previous educational experience? Maybe it was junior high, or college, or a staff training program. This anxiety is typical with adults, especially those who have not participated in education for some time. As is known from work on developmental stages, adults may be functioning on a high level in many areas of their daily lives. They are responsible, active, and competent. However, entering a classroom may throw them back to an earlier level, and their confidence may deteriorate. Even when an adult is excited about a new educational venture, such as returning to college to finally finish the long awaited degree, there may be a sense of uncertainty.

Another anxiety that adults may demonstrate when they first enter a classroom after a period of time is related to personal expectations. Since they are competent and knowledgeable in other areas of their lives, they may feel that the teacher or trainer will expect them to be knowledgeable in this new area. This may be unrealistic, but all the same it may provoke anxiety.

So, adults may feel anxious and insecure as they enter the classroom or begin the program. They may recall those negative classroom memories. They will probably expect the class or seminar to go just like a class they participated in years ago. They are starting something new and they may be nervous about what will happen. However, if the educational program is designed and developed on the basis of sound adult educational principles, then the experience should be very different for the adult student. It is important to be aware of what the adult brings to the program, defuse the anxiety, and help them have realistic expectations.

**Practical Strategies.** How do you accomplish these objectives? When designing your program, be sure to keep these anxieties in mind and include time for discussion. Since the program is not a secret, and since you are interested in having adults as active participants, it is important to include opportunities for information sharing.

Here are three strategies which will help reduce anxiety:

1. Present the overall agenda at the beginning of the program and the class agenda at the beginning of each class. This provides the participants with a clear picture of what will happen and what they can expect. They can then align their expectations with your's and, if there is a conflict, it can be acknowledged at the start of the program or class. For task-oriented learners this is very helpful. They can see what you plan to accomplish.
2. Take time to describe what you will be doing, both activities and content. Many may enjoy a pleasant surprise, but the classroom is not the place to put people on the spot. Throughout a well designed program, you may be using many techniques, such as group exercises and role plays, which may make some participants uncomfortable. Describe these activities and create a climate that is safe for experimenting and risk taking.
3. State clearly what you will be expecting of the participants. Whether it is on the job, in relationships, or in the classroom, people tend to have trouble when expectations are unclear or non-existent. Adult learners want to know what will be expected of them, how they are to respond, what they will need to accomplish, and how the class will be conducted. This is especially true if the adult participants are only familiar with "traditional" education methods. They may be expecting to just sit and listen as they have done many times in the past. If you have incorporated participatory experiences, make it clear what your role as a facilitator and their roles as participants are.

Incorporating these strategies into the course introduction and opening comments will help to reduce anxiety. Those first minutes of a seminar or class are crucial for the adult student. Your goals are to help them feel comfortable, welcomed, respected as adults, and confident in their own capabilities. A successful start will enable students to engage in the activity and participate to their fullest potential.

## **KEY 2 -- ELICIT AND INCORPORATE EXPECTATIONS**

How adults bring their own expectations to an educational activity has been discussed in several contexts above. Whether those expectations are riddled with anxiety, as explored in the first key, or are simple goals to be accomplished, adults



have their own needs and agenda. The first place to start in designing a program is with their needs. We should be asking "Who are the potential participants? What are their goals?" It is important to start with **where they are**. Chapter Two explored the concept of needs assessment and stressed its importance in adult education. Adult learners want to relate their learning to their immediate lives. They take a class, seminar, or training program because there is an immediate need in their lives to be satisfied. As Knowles (1980) suggested, adults are oriented to relating their educational endeavors to developmental tasks and immediate application.

**Practical Strategies.** The foremost strategy for activating this key is to conduct a needs assessment with potential participants. Whether the needs assessment is formalized and takes place prior to program development, or whether it is informal and takes place during the course, the process is crucial to the success of the program. It is during this process that we find out about the participants, who they are and what they want. Adult education is a collaborative, participatory endeavor. We need to know about the participants' goals and expectations so that we can utilize that information in planning and instruction.

Here are three other important and useful strategies for eliciting and incorporating participants' expectations:

1. Provide an opportunity at the beginning of the program for participants to share their expectations with each other and with you. An introductory exercise, listing expectations on a flip chart, sharing your goals, and asking them to add their goals are examples of these opportunities.
2. Refer back to these expectations throughout the program to reinforce the immediacy of the learning activities. Be flexible enough in the content and process to allow a few minutes to relate information to participant needs. Ask the participants themselves to share examples of how the content will relate to their world. Eliciting examples and cases from the participants is an excellent way to incorporate their needs and make the information relevant. It also builds confidence and a sense of group solidarity.
3. At the conclusion of the program, give the participants an opportunity to review their expectations and your objectives with what they experienced and gained during the program. This can be done in a number of ways. For example, hand out evaluation forms which list the courses objectives and goals and the objectives and expectations elicited from the participants at the beginning of the semester. Ask them to comment on how the course has met any these objectives. Also ask for feedback on what could have been done if any were not met. This information can be discussed in small groups or with the entire group by reviewing the flip

chart list of their initial expectations. This is especially important if some of their expectations were unrealistic. It helps participants understand what can be accomplished and promotes a more positive feeling, even if some of their expectations have not been met.

Working with adults means being flexible. This is particularly true when incorporating their needs and expectations into the program and instruction. When you have gained confidence in your own ability to read participants and in letting adults participate in the program, this strategy will be successful for you and your participants. Remember, adults do have experience and are responsible in many areas of their lives. Key 3 illustrates how you can take advantage of this.

### **KEY 3 -- ACKNOWLEDGE AND UTILIZE EXPERIENCE**

Adults have a wealth of experience - take advantage of this rich resource. Don't be threatened by participants' level of success and expertise in various areas of their lives. They are probably in your class or seminar because they see a need to increase their expertise or to expand their knowledge in a new area. Recently, the author taught a course in leadership and decisionmaking to school administrators. During the first class, the participants were asked if they had any background in decisionmaking. Two of the participants had; one had attended a well-known seminar and the other had read many books. A normal response might be to think, "Oh no, they will know more than me! What can I teach them?" A more constructive response would be, "Wow, what a wealth of information, how can I utilize this for the benefit of the whole class?" When we, as program designers and instructors, feel comfortable with our own abilities in the classroom, we are able to utilize our participants' experience in a confident and exciting manner. In the decisionmaking course participants were asked to prepare a presentation based on their experiences, which was incorporated into the course syllabus. They presented a different point of view, a broader perspective, and added many valuable resources.

This level of participation in the class illustrates the fact that the student-teacher relationship in an adult class is very different. Both are adults with expertise and knowledge. Education can be a sharing experience, a dialogical relationship. It is important to remember that adult students are not empty vessels that teachers fill up with facts and information; that attitude is not very successful with adults. Of course, adult students want information and knowledge when they come to a class, but that information and knowledge can come from many sources, including the participants themselves.

Adult educators need to acknowledge that adults bring a rich reservoir of experience into the classroom. This experience is one of the primary things that makes an adult student different from a child. In acknowledging this fact,

participants must be asked what they know and encouraged to contribute their ideas to the topic at hand. Involving the participants can give them a sense of empowerment and can enliven the educational experience. Their experience can broaden your repertoire as an instructor; you, too, can be a learner.

**Practical Strategies.** Strategies which can be used to acknowledge and utilize participants' experiences are:

1. Use an introductory exercise as an opportunity for the participants to talk about their own experiences with the topic. Encourage them to share their background and knowledge with the group. At the same time, be sensitive to the various levels of experience participants may have.
2. Small group exercises can provide good opportunities for participants to share their experiences with varied topics. Divide the participants into small groups or dyads for exercises, case studies, and role plays. Ground the activity in "real life" to facilitate the sharing of their experiences. Small groups provide opportunities for sharing information, and, for those participants who are uncomfortable sharing with a large group, they offer a more intimate arena.
3. Case studies provide an environment where the participants can draw on their own experiences to explore problems and present solutions. Case studies can be used individually or with a group. In constructing a case study, be sure to make it applicable to the participants' backgrounds so they can utilize their experiences. Although there are generic case studies available on many topics, it is best to construct your own based on the course content and your participants' needs. Another source of case study ideas is the participants. Ask them to write a scenario on the topic, one which they would like to explore.

The Life Line Exercise in Chapter Four is another good example of how to incorporate participants' experiences into the educational activity. Instead of giving a made-up scenario illustrating a person's life, this exercise asks you to think back on your own life to illustrate various aspects of adult development. In having students make presentations or prepare assignments, give them the opportunity to use their expertise. When adults see that they have this wealth of information, that they are capable of sharing this expertise, and that they can adapt their skills from other areas of their lives to the problem at hand in the class, their confidence is increased. If we as adult educators are interested in having participants move from dependent learners to more independent, autonomous individuals, then we want to provide opportunities which will expedite this process. Such opportunities also get participants actively involved in the learning process -- another important key to facilitating adult learning.

## KEY 4 -- PROVIDE AND ENCOURAGE ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

Adults are used to being active participants in their daily lives. They have responsibilities in their work and families and are accustomed to self-determination regarding their actions. As seen earlier in this book, adults learn more effectively and efficiently when they actively participate in the educational activity. It is important to create an atmosphere that encourages the active involvement of participants. Think back to the critical incident exercise. Were some of your best learning experiences ones in which there was participatory activity?

**Practical Strategies.** Active participation can be fostered by these strategies:

1. Plan and design the overall program with numerous opportunities for participant involvement. A variety of instructional methods will not only address participants' diverse learning styles, but will also make the entire program more interesting. When the content is abstract or difficult to grasp, use numerous illustrations and analogies to make the information more meaningful and concrete. Ask participants to contribute their own illustrations and analogies.
2. Use group exercises, role playing, case studies, group discussions, and practice. A variety of learning activities not only ensures participation, but also maintains interest. We have all been put to sleep in the afternoon by a long lecture during a seminar. Diverse activities keep people involved and interested. Providing variety also helps you through the "down" time. An activity which incorporates small groups, problem solving on a controversial issue, or a lively short video will energize the participants. Also, thinking back to the discussion of adult learning styles, it is important to have a variety of learning activities to meet the different learning styles in a classroom of adults.
3. Provide opportunities for participant feedback throughout the program. Encourage participants to discuss how they feel about the learning process. If the program involves several sessions, ask the participants to respond after each session. This will provide valuable information about meeting participant needs and learning styles, and demonstrate your concern for their participation.

Research has shown that "adult education is best facilitated in a participative environment" (Lawler, 1988, p.49). This means having a learning climate which encourages and facilitates the active interchange of ideas, content, and experience, and the active involvement of each participant. Whether designing a one-hour seminar on listening skills or a six-week workshop on conflict management, such an environment can be established. Involve the participants in



the design and implementation of the program through needs assessment and formative evaluation. Develop an interactive teaching style, one where there is an interchange of roles between you and the participants. Foster a positive and open attitude toward participants' questions and suggestions, one in which their diverse ideas and opinions are encouraged and welcomed. This key, as the others, is grounded in the concept of respect for the participant as an adult and as a potential contributor to the learning process.

## **KEY 5 -- IDENTIFY AND INCORPORATE RELEVANT CONTENT**

Adults want to put their learning to use right away. In fact, they may not be interested in what is presented unless the information is meaningful to something immediate in their lives. Is the content related to the participants' goals for the educational activity? Is the content appropriate to the participants' levels of experience? Is the instructional methodology appropriate for the content and the learners' levels of expertise? Can the information be utilized by the participants in the time frame they are expecting? These are important considerations. Adults plan their educational activities in relation to their developmental tasks, as responses to particular events in their lives, and to help them solve problems related to their roles in life. Adults are interested in more immediate application of information than children and teens. With this in mind, we want to make sure our content is on target for participants.

**Practical Strategies.** Helpful strategies for implementing this important key are:

1. Take participants' needs into consideration when planning and designing the program content and instructional methodology. A good needs assessment is invaluable for implementing this and many of the other keys.
2. Have participants list their expectations and objectives at the beginning of each educational activity. This way you can be sure to stay on target and adjust to the needs and expectations of the learners.
3. Use real examples and refer to real problems and issues from the participants' own experiences. This will provide them with models of how to put the information to work right away.
4. Use exercises and topics for small group work which reflect real life situations. Information from the needs assessment and profiles of the participants can be helpful in incorporating real life situations. Scan newspapers for interesting and relevant material. Take a look at the

journals, and other information sources closely related to your participants to get the latest news and the hottest topics.

5. At the end of the seminar, class, or training period, have the participants work on an action plan. What will they do next? How will they take what they have learned and put it to immediate use? What goals will they set for themselves in implementing their learning experiences? This plan can be helpful for participants in consolidating and assessing their learning. Reflection on one's learning enhances the process and helps in understanding what works within the learning environment.

Adults attempt to make sense of their learning and to fit it into their world. For example, when teaching adults to read in literacy training, it is more effective to have them practice on examples from their own lives. What do they need to read in their daily lives? Is it the newspaper, the church hymnal, their children's homework, the prices in a supermarket, or their telephone bill? Or in a graduate course in decisionmaking, ask the class to contribute incidents from their own professional lives which have represented dilemmas for them. Or in staff development for high school teachers, present strategies which fit the socio-economic culture of their school. This does not mean that you forsake theory. It does mean that you make the principles and theory relevant to participant needs; you present information in ways which make connections and relationships.

## **KEY 6 -- FACILITATE CHANGE AND GROWTH**

The last key is the most important; it is the foundation for all the others. Chapter Four discussed adult development and its relevance to adult education. Recognizing that adults do change and grow throughout their life span is crucial to adult education. "As we learn to see people in the context of their potential for growth, the possibilities for enriching their educational experience expand rapidly" (Daloz, 1986, p.45). Adults seek out education as a response to the changes they experience. Their goals may be to help them cope with life's tasks and effectively negotiate life's transitions. It is also during an educational activity that adults experience growth and expand their worlds and thinking. Daloz points out "We must be concerned not simply with how much knowledge our students have acquired, but also with how they are making meaning of that knowledge and how it is affecting their capacity to go on learning, framing the world in ever more inclusive and comprehensive ways" (p. 237). In this respect, education can be empowering.

Chapter One reviewed several philosophies of education. The philosophical directions concerned with personal development and personal and social improvement have a basic concern for promoting individual growth and involvement in society. Education can have a powerful effect on the learner, and it



is the educator's responsibility to understand that process. As adult educators, we need to be acutely aware of our role in participants' educational lives. If we are to promote and facilitate growth and development in our classrooms, we need first to respect our learners and understand who they are and what their needs are. "The adult educator who demonstrates respect is unwilling to use his or her position to coerce others to act or believe in a given way or to exploit those who are oppressed" (Brockett, 1988, p.13). We have an obligation to review our motives for the educational activity and bring them into line with those of the participants. Used improperly, the techniques discussed herein, such as role plays, group exercises, and case studies, can have the potential for abuse and disrespect. Careful consideration for participants in designing and implementing the instructional methodology is crucial for the success of the program and, more importantly, for the participants' well-being.

If education is to help adults change and grow, it must be remembered that an adult is an autonomous person, deserving of respect. Establishing a climate where the participants feel comfortable sharing and learning can be the key to making it work for them.

**Practical Strategies.** Some useful strategies are:

1. Remember that adults are experts in many other areas of their lives. Building on that confidence and illustrating ways in which their abilities can be newly applied will enhance the educational experience for them.
2. Provide positive reinforcement and encouragement throughout the educational activity. This is especially important during group discussions and question and answer periods. In these situations the adult may be taking a risk. We all remember when we wanted to ask a question in class, but felt foolish, or were put down by the teacher. Now is the time to create new experiences for adult students so they can go on to take greater risks in their learning processes.
3. Be open to participants' ideas, suggestions, and feedback. Adult education moves away from a teacher-centered orientation, where the instructor is the expert and the participants are uninformed. It focuses on a dialogical encounter between instructor and participant, where both gain from the experience. This may mean that the instructor will be taking risks too.
4. Be aware that adult students are individually different and varied. This characteristic of adults is an important consideration for adult educators. Diversity and variety can enliven the educational experience and enhance

the learning process. Understand and take advantage of participants' experiences, backgrounds, styles, and complexities.

Grounding your personal educational philosophy in respect for the adult learner will facilitate growth and development during the educational activity.

These "Six Keys" are based on principles of adult education which have been formulated by adult educators preparing criteria for research (See Appendix C). Their formulation is grounded in both theory and practice. They promote the idea that an adult learner is an autonomous person capable of growth and demanding of respect. Adult educators can utilize these principles to enhance programs and instruction. The strategies outlined here are usable in a variety of adult education settings. Their adoptability depends on creativity, flexibility, and willingness to engage in a dialogical relationship with participants. Adult education provides opportunities for growth not only for the participants, but also for you, the teacher, trainer, instructor, and facilitator.

To help you use the information presented in this book, Chapter Six includes a series of questions. These questions will help you focus practically on important aspects of working with adults. Answering these questions as you prepare educational activities will aid in building a successful and effective adult learning program. Chapter Six helps you to put it all together.

## THE KEYS TO ADULT LEARNING

### EXERCISE 4

#### CRITICAL INCIDENT

Think back over the past few years and the various educational activities in which you were a participant. What one activity was the **best** for you.

Describe the activity and its context:

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When did it occur?

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Who was involved?

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What made it the best?

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## THE KEYS TO ADULT LEARNING

### EXERCISE 4 (continued)

#### CRITICAL INCIDENT

Now think back over that time frame and those activities. Which one was the **worst** educational activity for you?

Describe the activity and its context:

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When did it occur?

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Who was involved?

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What made it the worst?

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## **CHAPTER SIX PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**

Working with adults in the classroom is an exciting and creative challenge for educators. Adults bring distinctive and diverse experiences and qualities to seminars, courses, and workshops. This book is intended to help instructors and program developers gain an understanding of adult learners and what makes them unique. It has explored their characteristics, their learning abilities and styles, and their development. It has discussed how important it is to be grounded in a clear sense of purpose before beginning, and it has recommended specific strategies that can make for successful adult learning.

Now it is time to turn to the task of actually working with your adult participants. Whether designing programs, developing instructional methods, or walking into a classroom to teach, you now have information that will help you be more effective. The following set of questions has been assembled to help put all this information together and make it work for you. As you approach the adult education task, review these questions as a guide. They can be considered a checklist of what is important to remember about facilitating adult learning. Some questions are restated in different contexts to emphasize an important issue or topic. So, take these into consideration, be open to your participants, enjoy the challenge, and good luck!

### **What's It All About?**

- What is your goal in educating adults?
- What is your purpose in this specific educational activity?
- What do you want the participants to get out of education?
- Are you interested in promoting personal growth, social change, organizational effectiveness?
- What is your philosophy of education?
- What is the underlying philosophy of education to which your organization adheres?
- What is the connection between philosophy and the work you have to accomplish in this educational activity?

## Characteristics of Adult Learners

- How will you obtain information about the participants and their experience before the educational activity?
- How will you obtain this information during the educational activity?
- How will you get information from the right sources?
- Will you conduct a needs assessment?
  - What form will the needs assessment take: interviews, questionnaires, program evaluations, focus groups?
  - Are you asking the right questions in your needs assessment?
- Who are the participants in this educational activity?
- What makes them different from other students you have taught?
- What are the participants' expectations for the educational activity?
- What are their expectations for your role and their role in the educational activity?
- What do they want out of this educational activity?
- What is happening in their lives that may have prompted them to attend this educational activity?
- Are they attending voluntarily, or is it mandated for them?
- What other roles and responsibilities will these participants have in their lives that will be competing for their attention during the educational activity?
- Have they been to other educational activities recently?
- What is their experience with adult education?
- What directly related experience will they bring to this educational activity?
- What indirect experience will they have?

- How will they want to implement their learnings?
- When will they be putting to use what they have learned?

### **How Adults Learn**

- How old will the participants be?
- How diverse will the students be?
- What learning styles will the participants be likely to have?
- What instructional methods would best suit the learning styles of the participants?
- What learning style will be best suited to the content?
- How can you accommodate the variety of learning styles?
- What accommodations can you make for the time needed to learn new content?
- How can you take advantage of the participants' ability to evaluate and apply information?
- Will the participants need special accommodations for seeing, hearing, or mobility?
- Are the classroom furnishings and location appropriate for adult participants?
- Can the participants accomplish their learning in the amount of time provided?
- Is the length of the class, seminar, or day appropriate to what a person can tolerate?
- Are there sufficient number of breaks?
- Will the participants have a variety of activities throughout the program to keep interest and involvement high?
- Would you want to sit through the program as it is designed?



## **Adult Development**

- What is the reason for participants attending this educational activity?
- Do they all come from the same age cohort?
- What is happening in their lives which may have an impact on their participation in this educational activity?
- What are their responsibilities outside the classroom?
- Can you predict how the educational activity will affect their lives?
- In what phase or cycle of development are the participants?
- Is the subject matter for your educational activity related to a developmental task?
- What connection do their ages and developmental roles have to the educational activity?
- How much anxiety will participants bring to the classroom?
- How can you help them move from insecurity to greater confidence?
- How can you help participants become more independent in their learning process?
- During the educational activity, what can you do to foster critical thinking and reflection among the participants?
- Will you provide support services for the participants?
- What type of support services are appropriate for these participants and this educational activity?
- In what way will the educational activity promote the participants' development?

## **Facilitating Adult Learning**

- Will you incorporate activities which will create a positive climate and reduce anxiety?

- Is there a clear agenda for the program?
- Will you incorporate opportunities for participants to review the agenda, objectives, and expectations?
- Are there opportunities throughout the educational activity for participants to relate their learning to their immediate lives?
- In what way will the participants utilize their prior experiences in this educational activity?
- Is the teacher-student relationship one of sharing, interchange, and dialogue?
- Are there opportunities for questioning and problem solving?
- Do the exercises and instructional methods allow for participant input?
- Will the participants be actively involved in the learning process?
- In what ways will you create an atmosphere which encourages this active involvement?
- In what ways will you elicit feedback from your participants throughout the program?
- Is the content related to the goals of the educational activity?
- Is the content related to the expectations and to the experience of the participants?
- Is the content appropriate to the participants' level of experience?
- Is the instructional methodology applicable to the content and the participants' level of expertise?
- Can the information be utilized by the participants in the time frame they are expecting?
- Will you utilize needs assessment in developing the program?
- Are your exercises based on real situations and real problems from the participants' life experiences?

- Do you incorporate an action plan for the participants at the end of the program?
- Are you promoting and facilitating growth and development during this educational activity?
- Will you establish a climate of respect for the adult participants?
- Will you incorporate opportunities for positive reinforcement and encouragement throughout the program?
- Are you open to participants' ideas, suggestions, feedback, and questions?
- Will you appreciate and take advantage of your participants' diversity and uniqueness?

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## **APPENDIX A NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESOURCES**

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Myers, I.B. with P.B. Myers. **Gifts Differing,** Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1980.

Information on obtaining the Myers-Briggs for use with your students is available through:

Consulting Psychologists Press  
577 College Avenue  
Palo Alto, CA 94306  
415-857-1444

The Learning Style Inventory (LSI) Self-Scorer and related materials can be obtained from:

McBer Company  
137 Newberry St.  
Boston, MA 02116  
617-437-7080

**APPENDIX C**  
**PRINCIPLES OF ADULT EDUCATION**  
(From Lawler, 1988)

**Principle 1:** Adult education requires a physical and social climate of respect.

Definition: An environment which affords participants a physical and social climate conducive to adult learning

Indicators:

- Room, furniture, and equipment are suitable for participants.
- Physical amenities are known and made available.
- A respect for participants which encourages participation is evident.
- Feedback is constructive, descriptive, and non-judgmental.

**Principle 2:** A collaborative mode of learning is central to adult education.

Definition: The involvement of participants, facilitators, and administrators in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the learning experience

Indicators:

- Participants, facilitators, and administrators participate in needs assessment and appropriate program design.
- Participants and facilitators are equally involved in decisionmaking, setting expectations, and conducting negotiations concerning program implementation.
- Evaluation of the program is completed by the participants, facilitators, and administrators.

**Principle 3:** Adult education includes and builds on the experience of the participant.

Definition: Learning which takes into account the participant's past and present experience

Indicators:

- There is evidence of assessment of the facilitator's and the participants' background and experience by the designer and developer.
- Opportunities are provided for the participants to utilize, integrate, and reflect on their experience in relation to what is being learned.

- Problem solving and problem posing are linked to the participants' on-the-job and life needs.
- The instructional process is geared to the experience level of the participant.

**Principle 4: Adult education fosters critical reflective thinking.**

**Definition:** Learning which involves the examination and questioning of information, values, beliefs, and experience

**Indicators:**

- Open mindedness is communicated; facilitator is willing to accept critical feedback and to allow opposing ideas, opinions, or feelings; participants should demonstrate the same willingness during group discussion.
- Facilitator and participants acknowledge content contradictions.
- Program design and implementation encourage participants to challenge content.
- A program philosophy is proposed and is open to analysis and change.

**Principle 5: Problem posing and problem solving are fundamental aspects of adult education.**

**Definition:** Learning which involves examination of issues and concerns, transforms content into problem situations, and necessitates analysis and development of solutions

**Indicators:**

- Activities include utilizing real life problems and concerns of the participants.
- Activities and discussion encourage participants to identify problems in program content.
- Facilitator encourages questioning in an environment that accepts a multiplicity of resolutions.
- Opportunities are provided to relate learning to current issues and concerns.

**Principle 6: Learning for action is valued in adult education.**

**Definition:** Learning in which the participant comprehends a situation, takes action, actually or hypothetically, in that situation, reflects on the result, and is then able to apply the insight gained to subsequent situations.

Indicators:

- Problem solving methodology incorporates experiential techniques such as case studies, simulations, role plays, and supervised practice.
- Activities encourage learner participation in the identification of options and considerations of the anticipated results.
- Participant and group self-evaluation ability and readiness to apply new learning in their own environments.
- Facilitator and participants create a supportive environment in which experimentation can take place.
- Dialogue occurs regarding the contextual appropriateness of the learning experience.

**Principle 7:** Adult education is best facilitated in a participative environment.

**Definition:** A learning climate that encourages and facilitates the active interchange of ideas, content, and experience, and the active involvement of each participant

Indicators:

- Participants are involved in program design and evaluation.
- There is an interchange of roles between the facilitator and the participants.
- Expression of different ideas and opinions by participants and facilitator is welcomed.
- Use of experiential activities, such as group discussions and exercises, is evident.

**Principle 8:** Adult education empowers the participant.

**Definition:** Learning which facilitates an awareness that one possesses the means to influence or change his or her environment

Indicators:

- There is an opportunity for participants to change the direction and content of a course or session.
- There is role exchange -- participants with the facilitator and with each other.
- Participants are encouraged to use their experience as a basis for problem solving.
- Evaluation includes examination of personal growth and opportunity for continued growth.

- Program planning includes organizational commitment to change.

**Principle 9:** Self-directed learning is encouraged and enhanced in adult education.

**Definition:** Learning in which the participant initiates and/or controls the learning process

**Indicators:**

- Participants are involved in the program design (including objectives, content, scheduling and evaluation).
- Activities encourage self-directedness in the classroom (learning contracts, self-evaluation, independent study, establishing social networks, participant sharing of materials and experiences).
- Activities encourage self-directed learning outside the classroom.

## EVALUATION FORM

1. My purpose for reading this book was:

**3. The book fulfilled my expectations by:**

65

## THE KEYS TO ADULT LEARNING

### EVALUATION FORM (continued)

5. The programs and participants think this book would help with are:

6. The most helpful thing about this book was:

7. The least helpful thing about this book was:



THE KEYS TO ADULT LEARNING

EVALUATION FORM (continued)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Position/Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Organization: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: (     ) \_\_\_\_\_

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